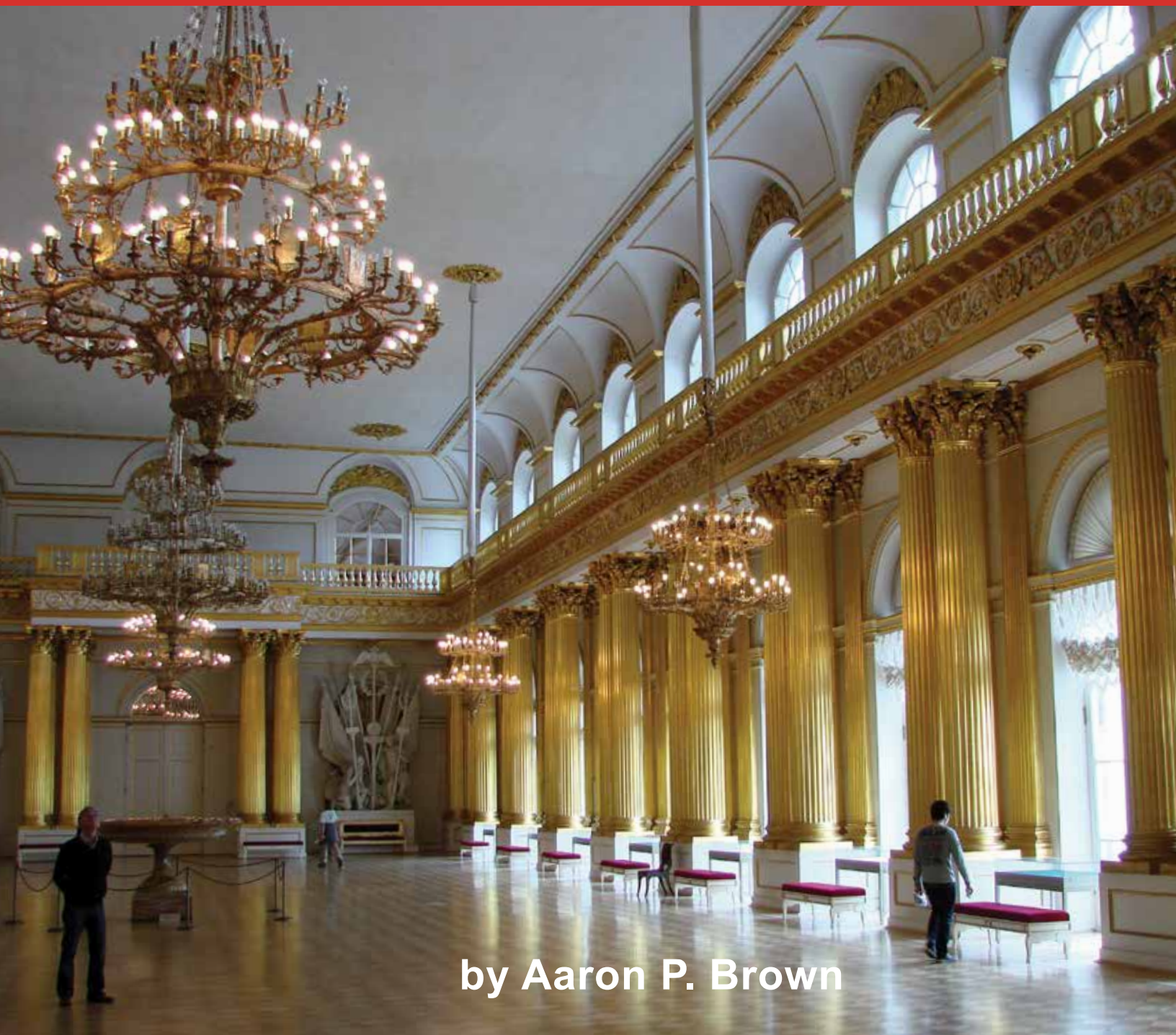




# St. Petersburg Russia

Historical & Architectural Highlights



by Aaron P. Brown





# St. Petersburg,

often referred to as the “Venice of the North,” was founded in 1703 by Tsar Peter the Great. For more than 200 years, it was the capital of the Russian Empire, that is, until the Revolution of 1917, when Moscow took its place. The land was conquered from Sweden in the Great Northern War (1700-1712). The city was built in what was once a swampy area, and the harsh weather conditions helped play a role in a very high worker turnover.

During development, Peter banned stone masonry outside of the city. He wanted all the stonemasons to come and help build this new city. He hired lots of scientists, shipbuilders, architects and engineers from many parts of Europe, as his goal was to make the city very cosmopolitan. Peter was met with opposition from the Russian Nobility in his efforts to modernize and westernize the country.

The city was a seaport, home of Peter’s navy. The many canals and bridges built were an inspiration from Venice and Amsterdam, as Peter envisioned lots of boat travel around the city.

## **Church of our Savior on the Spilled Blood**

Built on the spot of Emperor Alexander II’s March 1881 assassination, the church was erected between 1883 and 1907. Alexander had freed the peasant (called serfs) in 1861 and took on other progressive military, urban and judicial reforms. This put his life in danger, as many assassination attempts were made on his life, successfully culminating on a bomb being thrown in his carriage.

## **The Hermitage Museum** (front cover)

A federal state owned museum of culture and art, it is one of the oldest and largest museums in the world. Its collections have more than three million items and boast the largest selection of paintings in the world. Originally the former residence of Russian emperors, it has been open to the public since 1852.

## **Peter and Paul Fortress** (back cover)

This is the original citadel of St. Petersburg, built to Domenico Trezzini’s designs from 1706-1740. In the early 20th century, it was still being used as a tsarist government prison. It was refashioned into the State Museum of Saint Petersburg History.





## The Vasilevsky Island



is the largest island in the Neva River delta. From this vantage point, one can cover a lot of sightseeing, as many attractions can be seen from this point in-the-round. The Royals in the Winter Palace were also afforded a clear view of this spot. This area was intended to be the center of downtown, but that was eventually established on the left bank of the Neva river.

The focal point of this area is the old Stock Exchange, currently the Central Naval Museum, which was originally housed in the Main Admiralty building. This building is an excellent example of Greek and Roman architecture, with accents heavily mythological and nautical in nature.

The two Rostral Columns are no exception, adorned with representations of conquered ship prows. These columns served as oil-fired navigation beacons in the 1800s. They are still lit on special holidays. They flank the split in the Neva River, each representing the veering channels.





# The Kunstkammer

One of the first museums in Russia is among the oldest in the world. The Kunstkammer is officially known as the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. It was started by Peter the Great, built over time from his collecting souvenirs from abroad, a curiosity shop of sorts. One feature that is still housed are the deformed anatomical specimens in jars prepared by Dutch anatomist Frederick Ruysch. Many a Russian parent has threatened their young children with a visit to this exhibit as punishment for bad behavior.







# The Winter Palace

was the main residence of the Russian Tsars, built between 1754 and 1762 for the Empress Elizabeth, daughter of Peter the Great. It was fashioned in the Baroque-style of architecture. Elizabeth did not live to enjoy its sumptuous affectations, but Catherine the Great made great use of it when she used it to house the beginnings of an art collection bar-none. This was the seed for the Hermitage Museum, which is the largest art gallery in Russia and is among the largest and most respected art museums in the world.

Founded in 1764, Catherine the Great purchased a collection of 255 paintings from Berlin, Germany. Now, the Hermitage claims over 2.7 million exhibits displaying a wide range of art from all over the world and throughout history, including Ancient Egypt through early 20th century Europe. There are works by Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt, Ruben, French Impressionist works by Renoir, Cezanne, Manet, Monet and Pissarro, canvasses by Van Gogh, Matisse, Gauguin and sculptures by Rodin.





## The Sphinxes

Besides St. Petersburg being called “North Venice,” it is also referred to as “North Sphinx.” The city is located on the same meridian as the Great Pyramids. There are two 3,500-year-old sphinxes on Universitetskaya Naberezhnaya (the University Embankment) in front of the Academy of Fine Arts. The sphinxes were discovered at Egyptian excavations of the 1820s. In the early 1830s, they were bought from France by Russian officer and traveler Andrey Muravjev on behalf of the Russian Emperor Nicholas I and shipped to St. Petersburg. The sphinxes weigh around 23 tons each, making them difficult to transport. Their current resting place was designed by architect Konstantin Ton, including the pedestals, granite pier, bronze lamps and mythological griffins.





## St. Isaac's Cathedral

The gilded dome of St. Isaac's Cathedral is a familiar part of the St. Petersburg skyline. Built by the French-born architect Auguste Montferrand, it was planned as the main church of the Russian Empire. For 40 years (1818-1858), the construction and decor was purposely over the top. There are columns in on of the porticos that are constructed from are single pieces of red granite, weighing over 80 tons each. Other materials included in the construction are malachite and lapis lazuli. There is an observation walkway at the base of the cupola that visitors can climb to get beautiful views of the city. Now serving as a museum, religious services are still held on special holidays.



# The Bronze Horseman

Facing away from St. Isaac's Cathedral and toward the Neva River, this statue was commissioned from French sculptor Etienne Maurice Falconet by Catherine the Great to pay tribute to the founder of St. Petersburg, Peter the Great. Since Catherine was of German decent, she felt the gesture would help tie her legacy with the Russian monarch lineage. The inscription *Petro Primo Catarina Secunda* is in Latin and Russian, meaning "To Peter the First from Catherine the Second." The statue depicts Peter as a Roman hero, mainly because he created the most prominent reforms during his time.



The statue is mounted on a "cliff" carved from a single slab of stone. There is a snake slithering underfoot, trying to get at the horseman. This snake represents Peter's enemies and their resistance to his reforms.

The legend of the statue says that as long as the horseman stands in the city's center, enemies will never take St. Petersburg. It survived the Siege of Leningrad (1941-1944), possibly because it was protected with sand bags and a wooden shelter just before the attack.







Emperor Paul's paranoia was not unfounded, as he only resided in what was supposed to be a safe haven for a very short time. Paul was assassinated in 1801 he was assassinated in his own bedroom by an organized coup of officers, in allegiance to Paul's son Alexander.

The castle became an Army Engineers School, and so it became known as the Engineer's Castle. Today, a branch of the Russian Museum resides there.

# The Mikhailovsky Castle

Emperor Paul I was the son of Catherine the Great. Catherine ruled Russia until her death in 1796, and because Paul was not well liked by the nobility or the royal guards, his claim to the throne was haunted by the constant threat of assassination. To quell his fears, he ordered a fortified castle to be built. According to legend, one of the guards had a vision of Michael the Archangel helping him watch over the construction site. When Paul was told of this, the castle was christened Mikhailovsky (St. Michael's).





# House of Soviets

This building was planned to host the administration of the Soviet Leningrad government. Frequent downtown floods caused the project to be located in the undeveloped south outskirts of the city. Built during the transition period of power being passed from the people to bureaucracy, the architecture of the building combines constructivism (geometric forms of the 1920s) and neoclassicism.



Just before the Nazi invasion of Soviet Union at the beginning of World War II, the building was finished, but never used for its intended goal. In 1941, it became a fortified local command post for the Soviet Red Army during the Siege of Leningrad. Several small bunkers still exist at some of the corners of the building. Moscow Square is in front of the building. In 1970, the largest Lenin statue was erected. The Soviet research institute was also a resident at one point, focusing on electronic component design for military objects. Currently, various businesses rent out offices.





